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Scottish Bird News

THE QUARTERLY MAGAZINE OF THE SOC

No 71 Mar. 2004

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BIRD ARTISTS IN SCOTLAND

'Cloud break' (in oils)

Derek Robertson

Those childhood formative years growing up in north Fife with wildlife all around him, when he could be found poking around the garden pond or looking for birds' nests, are reflected in Derek Robertson's work; his love of nature shines through.

Will MacLean was Derek's teacher at Duncan of Jordanstone Art College in Dundee who encouraged a "free attitude" to painting which helped Derek to achieve his own unique style. Other wildlife artists that have appeared in this 'Bird Artists in Scotland' series have had their own influences, too, including Frederick Watson, Keith Brockie, Darren Rees and especially the work of John Busby whose style Derek strongly admires. All these people were, and remain, an inspiration to him as he embarked on a career to become one of Scotland's foremost wildlife and landscape artists.

So what techniques does Derek use in working towards the finished article? Sketching in the field is very important to him but it can be a hostile environment in which to work especially at the extremes of freezing weather or when sunstroke is imminent; fighting off midges or an advancing bull bring their own dangers! Islands are a favourite source of subjects but the crossings themselves can be quite eventful with almost completed paintings being ripped off the board in a howling gale and last seen heading towards Oban or Aberdeen.

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Niall Benvie

The Isle of May is a particular favourite and Derek has spent many happy hours there. On one occasion during one of my own weeks in the Lowlight both my team and myself were quite surprised when a certain Derek Robertson disembarked from the day tripper boat to request that he might stay with us for a night or two! Not only did he augment our food supplies but added greatly to the interest of the week as he collected various items to be sketched on our dinner table. He's recently designed the logo for the Isle of May sweatshirt.

A good deal of time is spent investigating and researching the subject matter, the area it inhabits and the behaviour of his chosen 'models'. Derek tries to sketch, as much as possible, with the subjects in view and often finishes paintings in the field. Outdoors, he works mostly in pencil and watercolour because it allows him to work quickly and, at the same time, using coloured papers which prevent glare; this combination allows Derek to paint fast in contrasting light and dark colours. Other 'tricks' include the use of extenders to prevent water colours drying out too quickly on hot days and gin (!) and salt to prevent the paints freezing in frosty weather.

Unsurprisingly, much of his field work is still carried out within easy reach of home. He has remained faithful to his native county and works from a studio only a short distance north-west of Dunfermline. This is very convenient as is the wildlife that inhabits the woods, moors and fields in the few miles around the studio. Work is finished off or worked up from sketches in the studio, an old stable building on his smallholding in the Fife countryside. Studio pieces are often completed in oils but also in the very unusual medium of gouache on linen; a demanding and unpredictable method that can produce extraordinary results.

Recent paintings have concentrated on the wildlife of the Scottish Highlands and Islands including Snipe, Eider ducks, Oystercatchers, Golden Eagle, Puffins, Ptarmigan and highland cattle.

Galleries around the world exhibit Derek Robertson's work and his paintings are held in private collections in more than 40 countries as well as in numerous public collections including those of HRH Duke of Edinburgh and the Scotland Office in London. Derek is a professional member of the Society of Scottish Artists.

The modern wildlife artist has to have a public persona through appearances in the press, radio and television. It is the visual aspect of books and television that are critical to artistic success and Derek's achievements in these areas are legion. The four-part television series 'Drawn from Wild Places' was nominated for both a Scottish BAFTA Award and an award at the Cannes Film Festival.

His latest book '*Studio under the Sky*' has been acclaimed around the world; I know that a signed copy of this limited edition publication sits proudly on the bookshelf of the wife of one of the editors of this magazine. Paintings, books and appearances have to be supported by critical acclamation and there is a long list of examples of these in connection with Derek's work. Perhaps the one that best sums up his approach appeared in an edition of Scottish Field which said ".....there is an enthusiasm for the world around him but the lengths Derek is prepared to go put him in a different league. It is the sense of "being there" that is reproduced in Derek's paintings so successfully."

Recently, Derek has illustrated books by Sir John Lister-Kaye. The first of these, '*Song of the Rolling Earth*', appeared last year and about the time this article appears the latest book '*Nature's Child*' is due to be published.

It's not all paper, pencil, paint and brush though. As well as having a fascination for wildlife as an artist Derek also contributes to scientific research with the results of this aspect of his work being published in respected journals. He is also heavily involved in bird ringing and is vice-chairman of the BTO Ringing Committee and serves on BTO Council as well as being chairman of Tay Ringing Group. He has carried out extensive surveys of reed bed birds including the largest tract of reed bed in Britain, the Tay reed beds, as well as running a Constant Effort Site at Rosyth. Add to this his involvement with the BTO working on a study of farmland birds using ringing, colour marking and radio tracking and we can see that the enthusiasm of those formative years is still there.

So, after the exertions of ringing, research and field activities there is nothing Derek Robertson likes better than to return to his studio and, with soft music playing, to finish off a painting. It's the peace and quiet that enables this artist to express himself.

Russell Nisbet

'The Old Wall' (in oils)

Scottish Bird News No 71 March 2004

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Contributions for the next issue of *SBN* should be submitted not later than 30th April 2004 to:

SBN Editor, SOC,
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Articles can be sent on disc or by e-mail (mail@the-soc.org.uk), although we do still accept typed or handwritten material.

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NEWS & NOTICES

New Shetland Recorder

A new recorder for Shetland has taken over from Kevin Osborn. All future records for the islands should be sent to Micky Mather, Hamarsgarth, Haroldswick, Unst, Shetland, ZE2 9ED. Telephone number 01957 711677. The now all-important e-mail address is recorder@birdclub.shetland.co.uk. We send Micky our good wishes and welcome him to this important post and thank Kevin for his services in the past.

Records for 2003

Your 2003 records should now be with your local recorder but if you haven't yet sent them then please do so without delay. This is especially important if any rarities have come your way and descriptions sent to your various Records Committees will be most welcome.

200 Club

The latest prize winners are: **December 2003** – 1st £30 Mr. I.J. Brown; 2nd £20 J.N. Schofield; 3rd £10 Miss J.B. Lammie. **January 2004** – 1st £30 Mr. M.B. Ross; 2nd £20 W.G.Prest; 3rd £10 Dr. A.M. Insh. Please note that the 'new year' starts in June and any new members would be very welcome. Please contact me at Rosebank, Gattonside, Melrose, Roxburghshire, TD6 9NH

Daphne Peirse-Duncombe

New members

We welcome the following new members to the Club: **Ayrshire** K.S. Ross, A Smethhurst, Mrs. S. Porteous, Dr. & Mrs. D. Johnston. **Caithness** C.Bird. **Central Scotland** Mr. and Mrs. C. Wilson, G. Reed, Ms. P. Lubbers. **Clyde** P.D. McHugh, C. Carberry. **Dumfries** R.M. Thomson. **Fife** D. Falconer, Ms. K. Jamie. **Grampian** L. Cargill, A.P. Matthewson, D. Eadie, Ms. M. McPherson **Highland** Mrs. K.L. Guthrie, Mr. & Mrs. D.W. Bonniface, D.G. Tanner, A. McCall, D.B. Reid, A. Call. **Lothian** Mr. & Mrs. J. Chalmers, Mr. & Mrs. E. Gordon, N. McMinn, I.W.C. Arnott, Ms. F. Maciver, F. Martin, A. Caskie, J. Taylor, C. McKenzie, Ms. B.J. Burgh. **Orkney** S.C. Dunnett. **No Branch** M.J. Witherall, Ms. A. Dickie, B. Allan, M Maher. **South of the Border** Dr. J.A. McEwan, Ms. A. Homer.

'Water birds around the World' Conference

SOC is helping with this major international conference being held at Heriot Watt University from 3rd–8th April 2004 details of which were included in SBN 70 (December 2003). If you would like to register as a delegate, you can find registration details on the Web at http:www.wetlands.org/GFC/registration.cfm. The Conference has many international partners with the main sponsors being the JNCC, Wetlands International and 'Landbouw, naruur en voedselkwaliteit' from Holland.

Club members, who would like to help with the conference and the SOC exhibition stand, will be able to meet research ornithologists from all over the world as the event is expected to attract about 400 delegates; there will also be the opportunity of free entry to some of the conference sessions. Please contact Bill Gardner at SOC HQ 013 653 0653 if you would like to help. The conference is organised by Wetlands International and is one of a series, including the famous Ramsar meeting.

Bill Gardner SOC Development Manager

European Ornithologists' Union Conference 2005

Amateur and professional ornithologists from all parts of Europe and abroad are invited to participate in the EOU Conference 2005. The meeting will be held in Strasbourg (Alsace, France) from 19th–23rd August 2005.

Proposals for symposia, oral presentations, and posters are invited and details about proposal submissions and deadlines can be found at http://www.eou.at.

The Conference language will be English. An important aim of the EOU and its Conferences is the international exchange of information and practical knowledge. Therefore contributions are particularly welcome if they present new results of ornithological research linking two or more scientific fields, comparative reviews of research running in parallel in different countries, or joint projects of research groups from different countries. As in the previous meeting in Chemnitz in 2003, conservation-related subjects will get special emphasis at the conference. Invited plenary speakers will give overviews of newest developments in topical disciplines of ornithology.

If you do not have internet access please contact the Secretary of the EOU, Dr. Wolfgang Fiedler, Max Planck Research Centre for Ornithology, Vogelwarte Radolfzell, Schlossallee 2, D-78315 Radolfzell, Germany.

Thank you for your help!

We would like to take this opportunity just to say a big "thank you" to all of the volunteers who have regularly helped out at HQ over the last year. Their valued participation means that we are able to stuff 2000 plus envelopes in the space of one day when we have a mailing going out to members! I would also like to express thanks to those who help us carry out day to day tasks in the office every week. An extra vote of thanks to Keith and Dorothy Macgregor who hosted the 2003 Volunteers' Christmas Lunch and opened up their home to 20 or so bodies! Their hospitality was much enjoyed by all.

We know that many of you already provide volunteer hours at a local level or help to gather information about birds on your local patch for your local recorder. Without all these volunteer hours the SOC wouldn't be the vibrant and important organisation that it is. As all those who currently help out at the mailings will attest, volunteering is not only a means of supporting your club it also provides an excellent opportunity to socialise with other volunteers. Although we have quite a way to go before we open the doors of Waterston House in Aberlady, we are beginning to draw up a list of those interested in helping out at the new building. It is envisaged that, with a little bit of volunteer assistance, we will be able to keep these doors open seven days a week providing a much needed place to dry off and have a cuppa on those wet birding weekends!

Volunteers Christmas lunch

The new centre will be situated on a bus route between Edinburgh and North Berwick and if buses aren't convenient we will happily arrange to pick people up from nearby Longniddry railway station. There will also be adequate car parking on site. Perhaps a morning's birding could be combined with a few hours in the afternoon helping the team at Waterston House to keep everything ticking over?

If you are interested in helping out with the quarterly mailings at HQ or would like to put your name forward for volunteering at Waterston House in the future, please contact Caroline at Harbour Point on 0131 653 0653. Contact your local branch secretary for details of how you can help out in your local area (a list of contact numbers was sent out in the September mailing).

Caroline Scott

Volunteers Christmas lunch

The Breeding Bird Survey in Scotland, 2004

Single Observer (Jimmy Maxwell)

If you are interested in making your birdwatching count and can spare 5-6 hours of birdwatching time each spring, we are looking for volunteers to take part in the BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) in Scotland. We achieved good coverage in 2003, with over 200 BBS observers counting birds on more than 230 sites across Scotland. This will enable us to continue to keep track of changes in the breeding numbers of more than 50 common and widespread species in Scotland. However, coverage remains sparse in some parts of the country and by increasing the number of sites surveyed, we will be able to monitor the fortunes of more bird species.

For the first time in the survey's history, observers can now enter their BBS bird counts electronically via the web using the new BBS-Online application (www.bto.org/bbs). As well as providing data entry

facilities, the system also allows the user to view counts from previous years giving the observer a picture of how the numbers of each species have changed on their site. In addition to BBS-Online, the new BBS web pages (available to everyone) provide a wealth of information and results from the scheme including species distribution maps, population trends and species lists for your region or county. If you do not have internet facilities do not be put off, all bird counts can still be submitted on the usual paper forms. All volunteers will receive a free copy of the BBS report each year. A free lowland bird song cassette is also available to all new volunteers taking part in the scheme, and for those taking on an upland square, a second upland bird song cassette is also supplied.

If you are interested in taking part in the BBS, please contact Andy Wilson at BTO Scotland (01786- 466560) or email www.bbs.org or log onto www.bto. org/bbs.

Mike Raven
National Organiser BBS

A new Bird Observatory for Scotland

The first Bird Observatory on the west coast of Scotland and the fourth Scottish observatory will come into being following ratification by the Bird Observatory Council (BOC) at its annual meeting to be held early in 2004. The Sanda Island Bird Observatory and Field Study Station has met all the requirements of the BOC which was confirmed at a Council meeting in June last year and the new observatory is now affiliated to the BOC.

Sanda Island Bird Observatory is governed by a charitable trust set up following discussions between the owners of Sanda Island and a group of nature enthusiasts. There is accommodation available for visiting ornithologists and other naturalists.

Currently there are ten separate ornithological studies being undertaken on the island including three colour marking schemes, nest productivity and nest record projects and four BTO Re-trapping Adults for Survival projects. Other nature schemes and projects are planned to be undertaken by both members and visitors to the observatory.

The first Annual Report is available free to members but can be purchased for £5.00 including postage and packing. The report and further details of membership of the Sanda Island Bird Observatory and Field Study Station are available from Iain Livingstone, 57 Strathview Road, Belshill, Glasgow, ML4 2VY.

Nature Conservation (Scotland) Bill

The Nature Conservation (Scotland) Bill is an extremely important piece of legislation which will have impacts on many areas of bird conservation. Effectively, it will review and update the Wildlife and Countryside Act, and bring in many new and improved measures to help protect birds, other wildlife and the important places in which they live. Together with measures contained in the Criminal Justice Act 2003, which introduced custodial sentences for some wildlife crime offences (including bird of prey persecution), Scotland will soon have a very powerful and improved framework for site conservation and species protection.

Following much consultation and the establishment of an Expert Working Group, the legislation was introduced into the Scottish Parliament in September 2003. The Environment and Rural development Committee has now completed its stage 1 consideration of the Bill and reported to the full Parliament. RSPB Scotland, as well as a number of other environmental NGOs, provided both written and oral evidence to the Committee. Its report may be seen at http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/environment/reports/rar03-07-vol01-01.htm; and, on 7 January 2004, the full Parliament approved the general principles of the Bill in a stage 1 debate.

Among the issues raised in either the Committee's report or the stage 1 debate were the needs for:

- A review of marine legislation;
- An improved framework for biodiversity strategy;
- An improved "statutory purpose" for SSSIs;
- A review of the Deer (Scotland) Act 1996; and
- Consideration of improved protection for specific nests, out of season birds, and for communal roosts of schedule 1 birds;

The Bill now passes back to the Environment and Rural Development Committee for stage 2, where it is scrutinised in more detail and amendments considered. RSPB Scotland and other conservation NGOs will promote a number of amendments addressing these issues and others, and attempt to secure commitments from Ministers in relation to implementation. A number of SOC members wrote to their MSPs and in some cases went to see them, in order to press home the importance of some of the issues being considered. This is enormously helpful.

It is hoped that the Bill will complete its Parliamentary passage in March or April and become law in the spring or early summer of 2004.

Lloyd Austin, RSPB Scotland

Addition to *SBN* 70

In the Little Ringed Plovers in Scotland article, the submitted data from Perth and Kinross was omitted from the list. There were no records of breeding for the 2001–2003 period. Our apologies.

Highland Bird Report 2002

Copies of this report are available from Alistair F. McNee, Recorder, Highland, Liathach, 4 Balnafettack Place, Inverness IV3 8TQ. Price is £6.50 including p&p or alternatively it can be purchased in local Highland bookshops at £5.00

Sanda Island Bird Observatory buildings

CONSERVATION NEWS

The following items have appeared in a range of publications and are included to bring readers up to date on some current developments.

Musselburgh Lagoons

According to a report in the East Lothian Courier an area of wetland at the mouth of the River Esk near Musselburgh, is to be classified by the European Union as a Special Protection Area. This has resulted in the preparation of a revised master plan for the lagoons area.

Black Grouse

A 1,250-acre reserve for Black Grouse is to be created by the Duke of Northumberland in the Lammermuir Hills in the Borders.The RSPB has reported that Black Grouse colonies have halved since 1990 both in the Highlands and southern Scotland. Lammermuir Black Grouse Recovery Initiative aims to create ideal habitats, together with conditions in which the birds are known to thrive, including predator control. The Game Conservancy Trust is advising the Duke.

A voluntary ban on shooting Black Grouse has been operated by most Scottish sporting estates since the early 1990s but, even so, the species in still in decline.

Red-necked Grebe

Dr. Malcolm Ogilvie of the Rare Birds Breeding Panel has reported that the Red-necked Grebe has bred in Scotland, and the UK, for the first time.

Corncrakes

Last year saw a 20% increase in the number of calling Corncrakes reported to the RSPB. This represented 140 more birds calling than in the previous year, the highest number recorded since detailed surveys began in 1977. Iona saw a 100% increase with 24 birds being recorded.

Nuthatches move North

A recent news item in *'The Scotsman'* reported on regular sightings of the Nuthatch in Edinburgh suburbs and Vogrie CP in Midlothian. It seems that the birds have overcome the anticipated natural barriers of both the Lammermuir and Pentland Hills. However, a brief reading of *Birds in Scotland* (V. Thom, 1986) does list records for Perth, Montrose and Wick. Nevertheless, it is good news and opens up the possibility of breeding further north.

Corn Bunting (John Busby)

Raptor Poisonings

The Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has published a study revealing that there were 92 investigations in Scotland of suspected pesticide poisoning involving wild birds. The comparative figures for other parts of the UK were England – 58, Wales – 27 and Northern Ireland – 7. In Scotland 70 raptors including all owl species, buzzards, Red Kites, eagles, Peregrines, Sparrowhawks and Kestrels were suspected of being victims of illegal poisoning compared with totals of 34 in England, 20 in Wales and 5 in Northern Ireland.

Nuthatch at nesthole, showing use of mud (Bobby Smith)

Corn Buntings

Sadly, the news is not so good for Corn Buntings on North Uist where a survey has shown a reduction of 70% over the last 20 years to 140 birds. In Scotland the breeding population is now fewer than 800 pairs. Among the causes thought to be responsible for this decline are a loss of winter seed sources, changes in the timing of harvesting operations and the impact of pesticides on chick food. It is hoped that ten feeding troughs installed by the RSPB on the west side of North Uist and Berneray will help to boost the birds' diet enabling them to survive any lean winters.

Birds of Prey

A new study of raptors across Europe, Birds of Prey in a Changing Environment, has been produced by Scottish Natural Heritage in partnership with the Joint Nature Conservation Committee and the British Ornithologists' Union. It reports that seven species are recovering from eradication in Scotland but four species are declining.

The White Tailed Eagle, Osprey, Goshawk, Merlin, Honey Buzzard, Marsh Harrier and Red Kite have, in the last ten years, increased in number or distribution. A hundred years ago these species were persecuted almost to extinction. The other side of the coin shows that the Hen Harrier and Golden Eagle continue to suffer from persecution whilst declines have also been reported in the Kestrel, Peregrine, Barn Owl and Tawny Owl.

Brian Cartwright

The Nuthatch in Scotland - part 1

Ray Murray

*This is the first of two articles covering the current spread of the Nuthatch in Scotland. This, the first, will look at the massive build-up from 1995 to 2000 using data in the Scottish Bird Reports (*SBR*), and the second article will complete the picture. This latter article will rely on requested data from local recorders and our own membership.*

The Nuthatch is distinct from other species mainly due to the way it moves, i.e. often in a downward direction. Although, of course, there are plenty of level movements as they forage around in the canopy and travel along branches, being 'downward' or even upside-down is just not a problem due to the bird's own physical makeup. Its habit of adjusting the nest-hole entrance with mud is also unique among our tree-nesters.

In my early days of birding I never imagined that one day this exotic species would appear in Scotland, but it already had; as far back as 1856 near Duns, with birds also seen in Skye in 1885. Lord Hume first noticed them at the Hirsel in 1928. Now we're leaping forward in time to focus on the first main expansion of the species in Scotland between the years 1995 and 2000. You will see, from the simple map below that this period has been divided into three parts, as the legend shows.

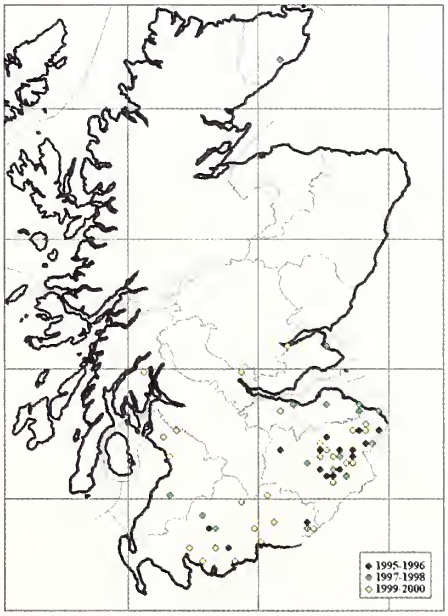
It is important to note that the original 'Black' sites (95–96), although not re-shown, remained and strengthened in the two later periods – the other symbols merely show the spread. Area boundaries have been added to let you check the species' progress into each county.

1995–96

By 1995, Nuthatches were already well-established as a breeding species in **Borders**, notably at the Hirsel and Floors Castle with six pairs each. The Galashiels area was another hotspot with breeding just started and increasing to five pairs in 1996. Monteviot had also started in 1995 with one pair, rising to two pairs in 1996. As the map shows, sightings for that period were increasing as far away as Dawyck Gardens. Also in **Dumfries & Galloway (D&G)** a 1995 sighting at Threave extended to two in the following year at Langholm and New Galloway. Back in **Borders**, the nut-feeders were producing sightings at Lauder, Hawick, Duns Castle, Paxton House, Denholm and Ashkirk. – the Nuthatch population was on the move and expanding.

1997–98

This period is significant for the first appearance of the Nuthatch in **Fife** at St.Andrews in 1997 – it stayed on into the following January. In **Borders**, the Hirsel was up to eight pairs, and sightings had spread to Minto, Pease Dean, Maxton Glen, Glenkens and St.Abbs. In the burgeoning year of 1998 thirty-five pairs were recorded, and breeding increased again with four pairs at Monteviot and an amazing ten pairs in the Coldstream area. Birds bred at Mossburnford, Paxton House,Wells Estate and Whithagh Park (a photo is shown in *SBR* 1998). The feeders produced new viewing at Ancrum, Craigurd and Innerleithan. Another Nuthatch turned up in **D&G** at Balmaclellan in 1997 and, in the next year, one at Canonbie but, as yet, no breeding in this area. **Lothian 1998** produced three separate sightings at Edinburgh, Haddington and Dunglass (the species had already appeared in Lothian in previous years), and one was even reported from Houstry, **Caithness**. But in 1998, the star attraction was **Ayrshire**'s first, singing at Kilkerran – what a sight that must have been!



Nuthatch records in Scotland 1995–2000

1999–2000

The map now introduces a new symbol as **Forth** enters the scene in 1999, with a Nuthatch appearing just over its border at Alva. Is this one of our Lothian birds that has probed westwards along the Forth estuary? Looking further down, we can see the spread for this period as **Borders** numbers rose to around sixty pairs from thirty-four sites. New areas were Dryburgh Abbey, Peniel Heugh, Ploughlands, Cavers, Gattonside, Lowood and Sunderland. Interestingly, breeding was reducing at the original stronghold of Floors; are our Nuthatches beginning to move through in their drive to colonise? (Details for all the other new locations in the **Borders** area can be found in the 2000 edition of *SBR*.)

In 1999, importantly, **D&G** now entered the breeding stakes with a few pairs nesting in part of the Loch Ken valley. Langholm, Beattock and Dumfries reported sightings and in 2000 there is now a real flourishing, with new areas at Gatehouse, Rockcliffe, Lockerbie, Palnure, Caerlaverock and Drumlanrig Castle. In **Ayrshire**, a movement occurs northward with a new site at Loans in 1999 and other two further up at Barmill and Dalry in 2000.

Also in 1999, **Fife** reported a new sighting at Newburgh and in **Lothian** another at Balerno. In the same year, a feeder at Glenbranter, **Argyll** attracted the species – yet another pioneer from somewhere!

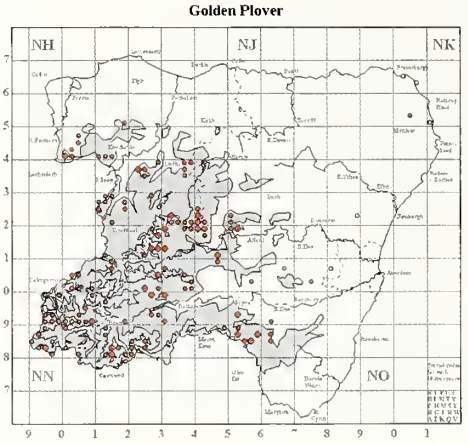
This account certainly highlights the use of nut-feeders by Nuthatches – a wonderful monitoring device and enough to get us all using them. So far, back in 2000, actual breeding had been contained in **Borders** and **D&G** but surely it has by now already spread elsewhere? Recently, I met a farmer from Slamannan in the Marsh Hide at Baron's Haugh, who had photographed a Nuthatch on his feeder last April. Unfortunately he is just on the wrong side of our Lanarkshire border! "Wrong" meaning that poor old Lanarkshire still awaits its first sighting – not one, even as I write this in 2004; most birders are convinced they've arrived, but somehow we're just not seeing them.

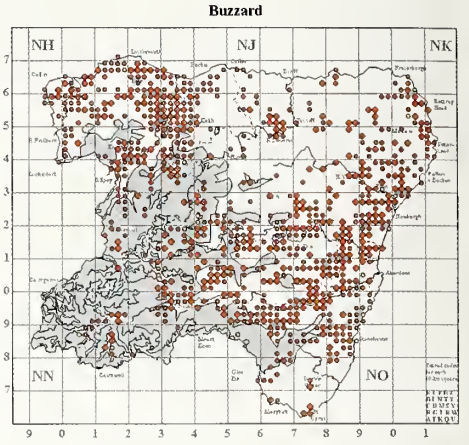
In the second article we will feature any definite sightings gathered for the years 2001 – 2004. Some of our local birds do pretty good imitations of Nuthatch calls – notably Chaffinch, Greenfinch, Great Tit and, inevitably, Song Thrush, so be wary. The local reports, recorders and area officers hopefully will share their records with us, but, of course, this is really a request for you, our members, to contribute. If you have good Nuthatch sightings (and especially photos), get them to us quickly (from today) – the deadline is the end of April – this will help us build up the best current picture of where the spread has reached in Scotland.

Jimmy Maxwell

A new Breeding Bird Atlas for North-East Scotland - two years of progress

After two field seasons, almost 40,000 records and contributions from over 200 observers, the North-East Scotland Breeding Bird Atlas is on target towards its completion in three years time. The coverage level, in terms of number of tetrads visited, has been excellent – 932 tetrads now have record cards, and at least one breeding bird record has been submitted from over 1,500 of the 2,340 tetrads. The project was introduced in *SBN* 68 (pages 8–9, June 2003). However, there is still an enormous amount of work to be done and we would be very grateful indeed if any birdwatchers from elsewhere in Scotland feel they can help. Even a day visit could produce lots of useful records, especially if undertaken toward the latter half of the breeding season (mid-May to July). There are many exciting and interesting places still to visit and always the chance of something unusual! The main lowland 'blanks' on the map are in western Buchan and northern Banffshire, and much of the Howe of the Mearns – we would especially welcome any birders from Angus or Dundee who fancied a short trip over the border into Kincardineshire. In the uplands, there is a broad band of moorland and bog to be covered, stretching in an arc from Upper Deeside, through Donside, the Ladder Hills, Glenfiddich, Glenlivet and over to the Dallas moors. The Golden Plover distribution map indicates where some of these upland gaps lie. Many coastal and woodland areas need first visits, but in fact many parts of the area need further work to improve species totals and level of breeding evidence. In short – most places across the area are in need of more survey effort, and we will be addressing this in an increasingly targeted way in future years.





Golden Plover and Buzzard breeding distribution in 2002–2003. Dot sizes indicate possible, probable and confirmed breeding: small open dots show occurrence in tetrads with no suitable breeding habitat.

Many species show obvious changes in distribution since the first North-East atlas in 1981–84. Work is underway to convert the map data from that period into a form that can be compared with the current atlas maps. One species that has experienced a very substantial expansion in range is the Buzzard, in common with many eastern parts of Scotland. They are now likely to be present in most tetrads apart from in high level areas with no suitable nest sites. In this map, any gaps in the lowlands are likely to reflect coverage, rather than absence, so we should have a very complete map by 2006.

If you would like to help with the North-East Scotland Breeding Bird Atlas – please contact either Ian Francis (Aberdeenshire) or Martin Cook (Moray). We would be delighted to advise on profitable areas to visit, and will happily provide any other advice that will help make a survey trip to the area easy and enjoyable!

Ian Francis, Ifnp@clara.co.uk, 01224 624824 (daytime); 019755 62457 (evenings). Moray organiser: Martin Cook, (01542 850296, evenings): martin.cook9@virgin.net

Blanket bog pools in the Ladder Hills – typical Golden Plover and Dunlin breeding habitat (Ian Francis).

Wildlife crime and species protection

Recovering Red Kite and Buzzard corpses from a tree-cache (Dave Dick)

This is the first of a series of articles on the popular and unfortunately still highly relevant subject of wildlife crime in Scotland by Dave Dick, RSPB Scotland Senior Investigations Officer. It is also the 20th anniversary of Dave taking up this post. Opinions expressed by Dave in this article are his own and not necessarily those of the RSPB.

The year 2003 will be remembered by me as an outstanding one for a number of reasons – not least for the introduction of the Criminal Justice [Scotland] Act 2003 in March. This amended the Wildlife and Countryside Act to include a range of new or improved powers for the police and courts, including the power of arrest and imprisonment for all offences under Part 1 of the 1981 Act. The effect of these changes was immediate and, by some of us, predictable – the progress of the Bill had been accelerated due to the need for it to be effective during the 2003 wild bird's breeding season.

What was not predicted was that there would be no egg thieves arrested, detained or imprisoned in Scotland – but within one week a gamekeeper was arrested [with attendant publicity] for alleged poisoning offences. This was followed by several other members of that profession suffering a similar fate – either arrested or detained for alleged offences involving poisoning, shooting or possession of birds of prey.

The reason for a 'no show' of egg thieves is almost certainly due to the high success rate of RSPB/Police/Court work in England and Wales where 7 egg thieves have now been jailed since the law was amended there in 2001. Scottish courts have always come down hard on such travelling criminals and intelligence from informants within the egg thief world suggested that they were avoiding Scotland – a pat on the back to all of those involved in helping change the law!

The reason for the high number of gamekeepers arrested or detained can be found in any RSPB report on raptor persecution over the last 20 years – the unacceptably high level of raptor persecution continues on shooting estates, as indeed it has done since before the RSPB existed in Scotland [1904]. It is of course no coincidence that the same profession has repeatedly been lobbying Parliament for legal culling of some birds of prey.

The effect of this on bird conservation is not hard to find – one clear example in 2003 was the appalling poisoning of seven Red Kites from the Galloway Reintroduction. Joint investigations into these kite deaths by RSPB and the Police came to the conclusion that six of these birds were almost certainly killed by only two poisoners and although in one case a man was charged and a report sent to the Procurator Fiscal in Dumfries no court proceedings will be taking place. In the second case two Red Kites and a Buzzard were retrieved from a hiding place amongst tree roots on the boundary between two 'pheasant shoots' – only found due to the radio transmitters attached to the kites. Again, no one will be publicly taken to account. Although these incidents will not stop the reintroduction from being a great conservation and economic success in Galloway they are a slap in the face to the local community who have given the project such wholehearted support.

This year will be the year of the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Bill – another group of improvements to the 1981 Act are being debated as this article is being prepared – these include offences of 'reckless' killing and disturbance of wild birds which should end the nonsense of shooters claiming that they intended to kill a heron but shot a duck instead...or a man climbing to a peregrine nest and claiming that he hadn't intended to disturb the peregrines, merely to photograph them, while the adult birds flew around his head screaming!

There is also a very important clause under debate which would make it an offence to be in possession of a pesticide without a legitimate excuse – this would end the ridiculous situation of the police being unable to charge a gamekeeper found with a labelled sack of carbofuran or jar of alphachloralose in his locked Land Rover, when his job, and indeed the law, would prevent him from actually using such chemicals. These two chemicals being the ones found in corpses of wild birds leading to the search in the first place.

These changes to the law have been long awaited by those of us who have had to help investigate literally hundreds of cases of illegal poisoning, shooting, trapping and disturbance of wild birds only to see clearly identified suspects walk away from any charge or walk out of Sheriff Courts due to weak legislation which fails to protect wild birds. Two quotes from Scottish Sheriffs are appropriate here...

Dave Dick

Sheriff Bogie at Stonehaven Sheriff Court on 25th January 1990 when acquitting a man of disturbance to nesting peregrines said "It would appear that the Act [1981] was intended to protect wild birds when nesting from among other things, the presence of unskilled and unnecessary photographers, using a system of granting licences to limit the number of persons. In my opinion the Act does not perfectly achieve this end".

Sheriff Stewart at Aberdeen Sheriff Court on 24th May 1989 when sentencing a gamekeeper from a local estate on charges including poisoning and pole trapping said "I find it rather ironic that Parliament permits imprisonment for those who poach game but does not permit the imprisonment of those who set illegal traps or use illegal poisons to preserve it" ..indeed...its been a long wait!

Ian Thomson

Aberlady Bay - past, present and future

I started birding at the age of nine with the Aberdeen branch of the YOC and subsequently the SOC, and on club trips was in awe of nature reserve wardens like Jim Dunbar at Loch of Strathbeg and Bob Davis at Sands of Forvie. That's what I wanted to do! An ecology degree and various contracts with RSPB and NCC later, I finally fulfilled that by being appointed as warden at Aberlady Bay in 1992. However, I was all too aware of the Reserve's reputation as one of Scotland's premier birding sites with an enviable list of rarities, a significant proportion of the Forth's wildfowl and wader population and a huge selection of plants, many of which I wasn't sure how to identify! My early self-confidence was further dented by regularly being asked if I was "the new Pete Gordon" - "No, I'm the old (ish) Ian Thomson". He was going to be a hard act to follow!

Recent articles in *SBN* have outlined some of the history of Britain's first Local Nature Reserve, before and following its designation in 1952; Keith Macgregor described the area prior to it's even being protected while my two predecessors as wardens of the site, Russell Nisbet and Pete have outlined their experiences working on the Reserve. It has been particularly interesting for me to read their reminiscences, although some of the facets of the Reserve have changed over the years, the feel of the place has remained largely the same.

Many of the concrete anti-tank blocks placed there during the war were removed in the 1960s to be used in the construction of Cockenzie Power Station and the remains of the midget submarines on the mudflats are now little more than twisted pieces of rusting metal. The pressures of wildfowling that were one of the main forces behind those pushing for Aberlady to be protected are now much reduced with a permit system and random checks ensuring only legitimate quarry species are targeted.

The sand dune system has continued to expand and develop naturally, with a dynamic area of sand spits changing with every winter storm. Some areas of formerly open water are now marshland supporting a rich diversity of aquatic plants and invertebrates while other sites, for example the Marl Loch, have been cleared to encourage different species.

Lapwing chick (Ian Thomson)

Rabbits are now scarce, their activities not being welcomed by the neighbouring golf courses! Sea Buckthorn, introduced to the area in the 1940's, is now widespread, as any visitor to the East Lothian coast will testify.

A few of the plant species have gradually dwindled or disappeared as the natural vegetation succession processes continue. Sea Lavender and Yellow-horned Poppy have both been extinct for many years. Some birds that were once common like Tree Sparrows and Corn Buntings are now rare - a picture repeated across the UK. Small numbers of the former may still be seen at Kilspindie on the west side of the bay, but there have been no records of the latter here since the late 1970s. Terns and Eiders, both abundant breeders in the 70s and 80s, have largely decamped to various islands in the Forth where, truth be told, they will have more peaceful lives!

However, there have been many gains, too, in the last fifty-odd years. A small population of Pyramidal Orchids was found in 1998, the first East Lothian record since 1908; the area has been colonized by Ringlet butterflies in the last five years and numbers of breeding warblers have increased markedly as the Sea Buckthorn has become more mature. In an average year, the site now attracts 30+ pairs each of Willow and Sedge Warblers, 6–10 pairs of Common Whitethroats and 4–6 pairs of Lesser Whitethroats. Other species that on

a national level are doing very badly, e.g. Skylark, Reed Bunting and Linnet, continue to thrive. Where numbers of Bar-tailed Godwits have declined, those of Grey Plover have increased markedly in the last 50 years.

Two bird species have shown a remarkable increase – Pink-footed Goose numbers now peak at around 15,000 in October, compared to just a few thousand in the 70s and early 80s; in 1993, a record 26,000 were counted! The other species that has undergone a remarkable turnaround is the Common Buzzard. As little as ten years ago, this was a very scarce visitor with 1–2 records a year – now it is seen almost daily and may breed in the near future.

Rightly or wrongly, many birders are attracted to a site by it's potential for rarities. Aberlady Bay, of course, has certainly had its fair share of these! But, it's not the easiest place to check, and many birders prefer going to Musselburgh 9 miles up the coast as it's a lot less difficult to watch! Truth be told, the two sites complement each other very well, and the value of each site is undoubtedly enhanced by the proximity of the other. There is plenty evidence that there is considerable movement of birds between the two sites, and those in between, each providing an alternative roosting or feeding area should there be disturbance at another. Perhaps the best illustration of this was when a Western Sandpiper was found at Musselburgh by Ian Andrews in 1997 – the day after the news was put out several hundred twitchers were at the roost there waiting for it. The sandpiper of course had more sense and was at Aberlady. Two days later, the twitchers were at Aberlady, it was at Musselburgh! The next day it was back at Aberlady – and so it has been with several other rarities.

Rare waders have always been the major attraction to birders at Aberlady and with a list including Caspian Plover, Greater Sandplover, Pacific Golden Plover, Western and Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, it's not that surprising! But it's worth keeping an eye out elsewhere on the Reserve too. A female King Eider has returned every spring since 1995, and every year there is a small passage of birds of prey. Though not quite rivalling Eilat yet, this has included Montagu's Harrier, Red-footed Falcon and Honey Buzzard (and the occasional Crane), as well as more regular Ospreys and Marsh Harriers. Scarce passerines are also an occasional feature, with 2003 bringing Great Grey Shrike, Firecrest and the reserve's first Barred Warbler (on 20th November!). I suppose a day in June 2002 illustrates perfectly the unpredictable nature of the place – where else might you see a Little Egret, a Spoonbill, four Rosy Starlings and an Osprey in one day?

Rare birds represent the icing on the cake however, and aren't really what the reserve is all about. The ethos of its management is to conserve the habitats, flora and fauna found within the reserve and the resultant landscape character. While East Lothian Council manages the Reserve, the majority of the area is owned privately; management of the site has been deferred to the council by means of a long-term management agreement. Consultation on reserve management issues is regularly sought with the Reserve's Advisory Group that has representatives of the landowners, conservation bodies such as RSPB, SWT and SNH, wildfowling interests and the local community; management work on the Reserve (and the warden's salary!) are grant-aided by SNH.

Reserve tool - sheep (Ian Thomson)

Female King Eider (Ian Thomson)

In order to ensure that management of the reserve is fulfilling its objectives, there is an intensive programme of monitoring of the numbers of wildfowl and waders, breeding birds, plant species, habitats and humans as well as a number of ongoing management trials to try to enhance the populations of key species. These, be they plants, insects or birds are what Aberlady Bay is really important for and it's recent inclusion in the Firth of Forth Special Protection Area and Ramsar Site help to further acknowledge the significance of the site.

For me, however, the appearance of one species on the Reserve in the last couple of years has been very important and exciting – sheep! Last winter, a trial commenced to investigate the feasibility of using grazing as a management tool to shorten the grass height in a bid to increase the numbers of breeding waders, particularly Lapwing. After one breeding season, the initial results were very encouraging and this experiment is being repeated and expanded. The whole reserve was grazed until the early 50s and it is perhaps ironic that the removal of the stock then contributed to a subsequent decline in breeding waders. One facet of the Reserve at least has returned to what Keith Macgregor would recognize from the 40s.

There will, of course, be a development in the area in the near future that will also hopefully have a positive impact on the Reserve. I'm sure I speak for all those who have a special affinity with Aberlady Bay Local Nature Reserve as we look forward to a close relationship with the SOC, who we will welcome as neighbours when Waterston House opens next winter.

Aberlady Bay is as attractive to me now as it was in April 1992. Why else would I even go there on some of my days off? I know that I am fortunate in being able to combine my job with my main interest. Most birders who have visited Aberlady Bay will keep returning; some have been doing so for over 50 years! I'm lucky in that I'm paid to go there every day.

Ian Thomson
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The National Nest Reference Collection of the Glasgow University Hunterian Museum

The largest collection of birds' nests in the world is in the Western Foundation for Vertebrate Zoology, located in California. An odd thing to collect? I don't think so. Name me three things that are special about birds: Many of them fly absurdly long distances twice a year, they make the most extraordinary noises, and they build wonderful nests with both hands, as it were, tied behind their backs. There should be museum collections of nests.

In 1998 I started our National Nest Reference Collection, a collection of nests of British breeding birds. It now contains about 700 nests of 64 species, and nearly 100 photographic images of a further 33 species. It is the best and most comprehensive collection of the nests of British birds in the UK.

If you have contributed nests to the collection, this is an opportunity for me to say how grateful I am for your support. Interesting acquisitions during 2003 included a Black Redstart nest, and a Magpie nest made almost entirely of wire 'wall ties' from a building site. However, the most exciting specimens we obtained last season were Scottish specialities, including nest-box nests of Crested Tit and nests of the Common and Scottish Crossbills.

There are nests of rare and not so rare species that we would still like to obtain. These include, in no particular order: Hawfinch, Corn Bunting, Twite, Wheatear, Whinchat and Grasshopper Warbler.

The nests of some species are just impossible to collect. They are the extreme nests – those that are too large to store, those of such token structure they hardly deserve the name, or those that are protected in some way from collection. Nevertheless, we want our collection to be a comprehensive one for British breeding species. The nests of Golden Eagle or Nightjar photographed in their context provide information that should be, although currently is not, in our collection. To represent these nest types, we are building up a database of images copied from photographs and slides.

We do want to continue to build up our collection of the nests of commoner species. The importance of these is that they can show up local or regional variations that stimulate further study. We have, for example an excellent collection of Reed Warbler nests from Bristol thanks to someone in the area who studies their breeding success. From these, zoology students at the University of Glasgow have been able to study the design of nests, in particular the nest attachment.

Below left; *Swallow's nest built on cricket stumps,* ***above;*** *Chaffinch nest display,* ***above right;*** *nest of Scottish Crossbill (all M. Reilly).*

In 2003 we were also donated seven Long-tailed Tit nests from the Hamilton area to add to our existing collection, and eleven Tree Sparrow nests from Rutland. All of these bring with them information to stimulate further study. Since the year of the foundation of the collection we have had an excellent supply of Blue Tit nests from Nottinghamshire. This would normally be more than enough by now, except that we know the exact location of each nest-box in relation to the woodland study site, and have some nests built by the same bird in successive seasons. If you are yourself doing field work on a particular species, and are able to collect some of their nests at the end of the season, we would appreciate them. It might help your own work to have these nests in a secure place, available for further study.

The Nottinghamshire nests are also interesting because of the case of the disappointed car thief. We have had an excellent and varied selection of nests from a certain man every year except one. Three years ago, just after his car had been filled up with cardboard boxes laden with nests ready for their journey to Glasgow, it was stolen. I struggle to imagine the moment when the boxes of seeming electrical goods were opened. Neither car nor nests were recovered.

Now that we have established this collection, we are keen that people should make use of it. We have from the outset used the collection for teaching and it has been valuable for my own research. We are beginning to become more widely known. Last autumn we had two visitors both wishing to publish information on bird nests, one an ornithological writer from England, one an artist and book illustrator from Japan. If you would like to make use of the collection, do get in touch.

If you would like to contribute to the collection, we do provide a guidance sheet on how to collect nests in an appropriate way, and also a nest collection form for additional details to accompany the nest or photograph. For these, contact me at: M.H.Hansell@bio.gla.ac.uk, or you can write to: IBLS, Graham Kerr Building, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8QQ.

Dr. Mike Hansell, University of Glasgow.

The Galloway kite trail

Dave Henderson

An exciting new opportunity to view spectacular Red Kites is now attracting the attention of birdwatchers in Dumfries and Galloway and from much further afield. The 'Galloway Kite Trail', around beautiful Loch Ken, promotes the population of kites, recently re-established in Kirkcudbrightshire; these birds are seen as a source of nature-based tourism to benefit local communities in the area. In so doing, the trail is helping to strengthen the `ownership' of the kites by local communities and tourist operators.

Developed by RSPB Scotland, with assistance from Making Tracks, Scottish Natural Heritage, Forestry Commission Scotland, Dumfries & Galloway Raptor Study Group and local businesses, the trail includes various facilities around the loch such as footpaths, viewpoints, information points, CCTV (in summer), release cages and RSPB Scotland's Ken-Dee Marshes Reserve, all of which are good places to see kites and other wildlife.

A feeding station with a hide has been established at Bellymack Hill Farm near Laurieston, and over 30 kites have often been seen together during the winter

www.RSPB-Images.com

Chris Rollie

months. These have included many of the birds released in 2003 as well as adult birds and two individuals that arrived from other populations; the site also offers good views of Raven and Buzzard. Although large numbers of kites are best seen in late afternoon in the winter months, there are generally some kites around all day at any time of the year. The feeding station is only ten minutes drive from the Ken-Dee Marshes Reserve and around 30 minutes drive from RSPB Scotland's Mersehead Reserve, and so can be easily integrated within a good day's birding at any time of the year.

Interpretation has been installed at key points on the trail and these are highlighted in a promotional leaflet and map that forms a fold-out guide to the trail; a special trail for children has also been developed. Some local businesses such as hotels and B&Bs are also partners in the kite trail project each displaying a unique information board on various aspects of the kites' history and biology. They can also provide up-to-date information on the kites.

Several birding groups have already enjoyed visits to the trail and it is likely that more birdwatchers will take the opportunity to come to see the kites in this fantastic setting. Supporting the trail helps to secure the local population of kites by making them a financial asset to the area that may also benefit local businesses. With eight kites illegally poisoned in South West Scotland in 2003 the birds need all possible community support to help them establish a viable breeding population in Galloway.

Information on the trail can be obtained from the RSPB Scotland office in Glasgow on 0141 331 0993 or from Dumfries and Galloway Tourist Board on 01387 253862.

Chris Rollie

Get out your Mass Spectrometer!

Redwing on nest in Norway (Bobby Smith)

The purpose of this article is to provide a layperson's insight into the science behind the use of mass spectrometry to generate information on bird migration and to suggest how the technique might be used here in Scotland.

Having just retired, I was looking forward to some peaceful bird watching along the Solway Coast when Mr. Secretary Brian Smith, SOC (Dumfries Branch) informed me that it was 'our turn' to produce an article for the *Scottish Bird News*. So that's what happens the moment your feet go up on the comfy stool! No rest for the wicked I presume. Not long before this breach of the peace occurred, a neighbour with an interest in birds phoned to grill me on atomic theory. Although I suspect it was to give her grandchildren some help with their homework, I could not be certain of this. Surely it was nothing to do with her ornithological pursuits?

Giving this a little more thought, I recalled an article that I had downloaded from the internet the previous year which described how feather samples of a migratory songbird in North America were analysed to determine where it winters. The bird mentioned in the study was the Black-throated Blue Warbler which breeds in some eastern states of the USA and Canada but has the good sense to fly to the West Indies when the weather gets colder. Moulted feathers were collected from several locations in the wintering and in the breeding grounds. These were analysed using a mass spectrometer and the results recorded, to be used later as standards for comparison. The idea was to try to match a feather from an individual bird with one of those in the feather bank. If a match could be made, it may be possible to identify that bird's summer or winter home.

Why do you need a mass spectrometer?

Feathers of the same type from the different samples have no significant visual differences and they have the same chemical properties. The solution to getting a reliable match lies in using a mass spectrometer because it can identify and calculate the abundance of the different types of atoms in the keratin protein of each feather. You might expect that the keratin would be unrelated to where the bird was while the feather was growing but, on an atomic scale, this is not the case.

Why the feathers are different from different places

The food eaten by birds is organic in nature and comes either from plant material or, if it is animal, can be traced back through the food chain to plants. In order to produce this food the plants require water and carbon dioxide; sunlight provides the plants with the energy needed for the production to take place. Now for the technical bit!

Water is made up of hydrogen and oxygen atoms joined together in a ratio of 2 to 1. (I can almost hear you thinking "H^2O"). What may not be so well known is that hydrogen atoms are not all identical, although you may have been told that they are when you were at school. What I told my neighbour was that there are three different types of hydrogen atom. The one with the smallest mass is by far the most common and it weighs in at 1 unit on the atomic scale. Think of it as 1H. Chemically, the second one behaves identically to this lightweight particle but it muscles in at twice the mass. It is sometimes called deuterium or 'heavy hydrogen'. Think of it as 2H. These different forms of hydrogen are called isotopes.

Here we come to the crucial part. Isotopes 1H and 2H are not distributed uniformly throughout the Earth. Water molecules that contain one atom, or possibly two, of the heavier 2H isotope tend to form raindrops more easily. It is reasonable to assume that because there are variations in rainfall in different localities, there will be

geographical variations in the isotope ratio also (the isotope ratio is Number of 1H atoms/Number of 2H atoms). The variation will be evident in the water, in the plants that absorb it and also higher up the food chain in the body materials of birds, such as their feathers. If you are still with me then I say "Congratulations! The rest of it is easy and so it's bound to get better!"

You will be pleased to know that carbon also has stable isotopes. In the atmospheric carbon dioxide, atoms of 12C and 13C occur. Their ratio also varies geographically and this, together with the hydrogen isotope ratio can be detected by the mass spectrometer. It churns out a chart, which displays the data from a feather. This acts like a 'fingerprint' that maps the feather to the location where it was obtained. Naturally enough you are not likely to find one of these machines in your bird club's Christmas catalogue but your friendly local university will have one. This brings me to something else that I have realised lately.

The local slant

Have you noticed that to impress your birder friends you need to tell them not only which species you have seen but also, if appropriate, which sub-species it belongs to? While still struggling to identify some species of birds, it is probably premature for me to be involved in this one-upmanship but, having been impressed by the large numbers of Redwing seen in Dumfriesshire during October 2003 I have tried to find out a little more about their migration routes and their taxonomy. When you know something about the former topic it helps you to field the inevitable question "Where do they come from then?"

I found out that the nominate race, *Turdus iliacus iliacus*, breeds in Scotland, Fennoscandia and Siberia and that there is another sub-species, *Turdus iliacus coburni*, which spends the summers in Iceland and the Faroe Islands. This latter sub-species can be distinguished by having deeper buff ground colour to the sides of the head, on the throat and breast. It also has coarser and more extensive marks and streaks but these differences can be fairly subtle. Although observation and bird ringing have produced a lot of information about the Redwing's migratory habits there still remains a lot to be discovered. An example of this is that there are few ringing recoveries of birds from the small Faroese population, some of which visit Scotland in winter. It would be interesting to learn more. Ringing is not an efficient way of tackling this because only a few ringed birds are ever recovered. Using the mass spectrometer technique would allow acceleration in the collection of migration data. Wouldn't it be nice to find a Redwing feather and be able to send it in somewhere, in order to discover where its former owner spent the previous summer?

A visiting Redwing to the Isle of May, head above, underwing below (Bobby Smith)

What about a mass spectrometer for Waterston House then? I will volunteer to collect the Feathers in Iceland or the Faroes. Anyone for Siberia?

Duncan Irving, Chairman, SOC (Dumfries Branch)
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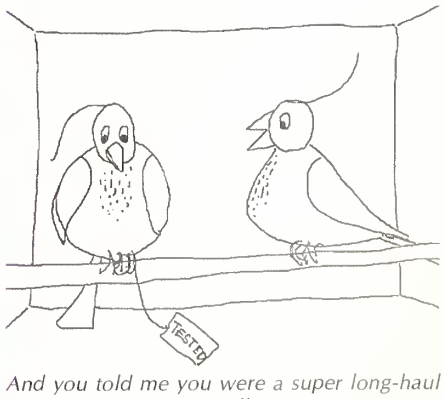


And you told me you were a super long-haul migrant! (Jimmy Maxwell)

NOTES & COMMENT

Little Grebe Behaviour

On 9th November 2003 my wife and I were walking on Easthaven beach near Carnoustie when we noticed the strange behaviour of a small bird near the water's edge. The sea was running quite high at the time and the bird was making desperate efforts to enter the sea but was continually being thrown back. As we approached it ran back up to the marram grass, a short distance away and appeared exhausted. There were a number of gulls in the area including some Black-backed together with some dogs.

We picked up the bird, which made no resistance, and it curled up in my wife's hand. Our knowledge was not sufficient to be able to recognise it and our bird book didn't seem to offer any guidance at the time. On arriving home we put the bird into a cardboard box with a top on it and, after some initial flapping, it settled down. Contact was made with the RSPCA and a lady from the Animal Welfare Centre at Perth arrived and confirmed that it was a Little Grebe; she subsequently matched it with the relevant entry in the bird book.

She agreed that it was exhausted and told us to leave it in the box overnight and return it to an appropriate place the next morning. Following her advice I took the bird to Craigmill Den, east of Carnousite, releasing it by the edge of the burn; it soon settled and started feeding. No sign of it has since been seen on subsequent visits.

Dan Hood
12 Braehead Drive, Carnoustie

Little Grebe in happier times (Lang Stewart)

Pre-migration song chorus of Redwings

I became familiar with the territorial spring song of the Redwing when filming them breeding in Scotland in 1988; it is a rather monotonous descending cadence of, usually, five loud, clear notes ending in a conversational warbling twitter that is rather unstructured and variable. The whole song lasts less than four seconds and lacks any variation by the individual songster. A phenomenon I have noticed for many years now in West Lothan in March and early April is the use of this twittering sub-song as a communal display by wintering Redwings preparing for their spring migration back across the North Sea. The only reference that I have found to this behaviour in the literature is on p.1008 of vol. V of *The Birds of the Western Palaearctic* which records "Sub-song. Chorus heard from flocks resting on migration in winter quarters dominated by twittering sub-song (Witherby, *et al.* 1938*b*)."

There is, in most years, a flock of about 25 Redwings which arrive in October at Mains Park on the west side of Linlithgow, a typical suburban park of about 15 acres dominated on the north side by a railway embankment covered with hawthorn. These are often red with berries in September, a feeding resource of millions of haws. I have recorded several individual birds feeding on these fruits on arrival and often watched ten of the fruits disappear in quick succession down one throat. Simple arithmetic shows that 25 Redwings feeding at this rate only four times every hour for, say 10 hours, consume a million haws by mid-January when the first snow usually comes. However, they always survive the winter partly because of the abundance of fruit and partly because, under the dense hawthorn thickets, there is leaf litter full of nematodes and other micro-organisms that they turn to when the berries are all gone.

About mid-March, the morning chorus starts. At first it is just a few birds sitting up in the bushes or ornamental prunus trees between the rugby fields. By April, the whole flock gathers in the taller limes and sycamores along the west side of the park. The noise is like the sound of running water over stones, a magic chorus of hope to stimulate them for the arduous journey ahead. In mid-April, it reaches a crescendo of sound that is a dominant feature of the public footpath

Redwing (John Busby)

from Mains Road to Linlithgow Bridge every morning and especially when the sun picks out their pale breasts as they face south-east into the light.

Apart from the Dipper that occasionally flies through the tunnel where the Mains Burn runs under the railway and sits on a stone under the footbridge singing his babbling song with great gusto, the Redwing chorus is now my favourite spring sound. However, it must have a purpose which is, presumably, to bind 25 individual birds together in a common resolve to make the journey a thousand miles north. It could be to where I filmed them nesting in birch woods on the island of Carlsoy well into the Arctic Circle north of Tromso, Norway. Soon after mid-April they are gone and my morning walk is strangely quiet. I wonder that, to my knowledge, no other ornithologist seems to have noticed this phenomenon in Scotland.

If you have seen similar activities, please send details of any Redwing spring chorus observations with, if possible, numbers and dates. Details should be sent to me at Mains House, Linthlithgow, West Lothian, EH49 6QA, e-mail:chris.mylne@lineone.net.

Chris Mylne

Montagu's Harrier - a request for Scottish Records

As part of the forthcoming SOC book '*Birds of Scotland*', I have been asked to write the description of Montagu's Harrier. This bird of prey is an extremely rare visitor and an even rarer breeder in Scotland. Indeed, it is probably the rarest breeding bird of prey with only five breeding attempts, the last in 1955. Also, I have heard that the above species could possibly have bred in East Lothian in the early 90s – again any information would be gratefully received.

As part of my research on this species, I came across a fascinating piece describing the nesting of Montagu's Harrier in Perthshire during 1953 in *Scottish Field* (Nov. 1953, pages 23–4). The article was written by Edward Blake and contains some wonderful photographs of the nesting harriers by David Stephen. As far as I know these are the only existing photos of nesting Montagu's Harrier in Scotland. I have also read another article about these Perthshire birds by the same author, featured in the SWT magazine (Autumn 2001). I am very interested in the author Edward Blake and would welcome any information concerning his whereabouts at the present.

My reason for writing is to ask readers if they might have any more information about these articles in particular and more generally about Montagu's Harriers breeding in Scotland. There was great secrecy around these breeding birds at the time and so any new information would help to make a more complete picture for the book of this beautiful species.

Dr. Christopher McInerny

Request for information on House Sparrows' nests

Various books on Britain and Scotland perpetuate the statement that House Sparrows sometimes construct their own nests – in trees or hedges and perhaps dome shaped or untidy in character – instead of their normal usage of holes in buildings. Is this still true, to what extent, and where in Scotland?

Harry Dott is seeking records of House Sparrows in Scotland building nests in trees, bushes, hedges, plants, or any non man-made places or unusual sites. All responses will be acknowledged but the information submitted should, as far as possible, mention the place, when it happened – the year as near as possible (years it didn't happen would be useful if known), and whether one pair, two, or approximately how many were involved. Other information would be of interest, such as whether or not young were successfully reared, or whether nests were associated with Tree Sparrows or other species.

All information should be sent to Harry Dott, 12/15 Ethel Terrace, Edinburgh EH10 5NA or e-mail at harrydott@hotmail.com.

Spotted Flycatcher nest

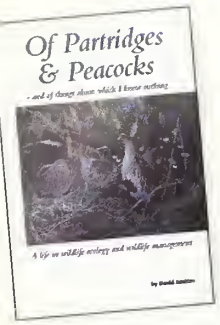
A pair of Spotted Flycatchers built a nest just outside the entrance/exit of the plant centre at the National Trust for Scotland's Threave Garden, near Castle Douglas, Dumfries & Galloway. This activity took place in July at the height of the visitor season. None of the members of staff noticed that the nest was being built until it had been completed.

A notice was erected to try to dissuade visitors from looking too closely and it was not expected that the birds would stay as the nest was next to the display and the door to the plant centre was the only access; between 150–200 visitors a day pass this table which was within two or three feet of the nest. The pair successfully fledged three young and one egg remained unhatched in the nest. No disturbance to the birds occurred at any time during their stay.

Richard Cinderey, Church Road, Kirkpatrick-Durham, Castle Douglas

Spotted Flycatcher nesting at Threave Garden (Richard Cinderey)

BOOK REVIEWS



Of Partridges and Peacocks – and of things about which I know nothing by David Jenkins 2003. TLA Publications, Aboyne. ISBN 0-9546277-0-9 £21.00

This book is unlike any other I recall reading and will be a conundrum for libraries to catalogue. The point of the title becomes clear but it offers few clues as to the content. Outwardly it appears to be a straightforward autobiography but the fact that it is by a scientist who can write clear, readable English in an interesting and outstanding style (an ability less common than it used to be) at once puts it into a select class.

Following the autobiographical chapters the author gives accounts of a number of contrasting research projects, activities and organisation with which he has been involved and widely scattered around the world but starting in north-east Scotland; they end, more or less, in the Breckland of Suffolk. In all these accounts he outlines the research questions and the techniques used to answer them in clear terms with very little jargon. The reader is given an unusual window on to the way that scientific research is carried out, at least, in ornithology though some aspects of this may be shared by most academic fields. There are no graphs or tables and very few statistics (it's not that kind of book) but it will provide much to interest any reader with a general concern for conservation and sustainability. There are also many anecdotes and much humour.

There is at least one more strand to this book. In the course of his accounts of research projects that author has something to say about how research work and institutes are best organised. He worked, at first, with seniors who must have known the lean times of the '30s and then enjoyed the halcyon days (his words) of the '50s and '60s before having to adjust to the conditions of the '70s and '80s. Much of what he says in this vein may still be unfashionable and all the more in need of saying for just that reason.

The author seems to have enjoyed his life and research work very much and probable enjoyed the labour of writing this book; I have certainly enjoyed reading it.

John Law

The New Encyclopaedia of Birds. Edited by Christopher M. Perrins, Oxford University Press 2003. 656 pages. Hbk. ISBN 0-19-852506-0 Price £35.00

The New Encyclopaedia of Birds is an updated version of a similarly titled encyclopaedia published in 1985, both of which were edited by Christopher Perrins. In the 20 odd years between the versions, the breadth of world ornithological knowledge has increased substantially, along with the quality of technology used to photograph birds and the techniques used to establish the identity of separate species. The new encyclopaedia has made an excellent attempt to acknowledge these advances and still produce a hardback of only marginally larger stature than its predecessor, which is both more detailed and user friendly.

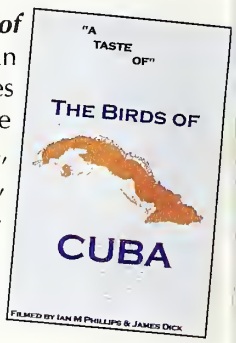
The sections are no longer as broad and all encompassing as in the old version with more detail afforded to smaller family groups and the inclusion of photographs or illustrations of species that were only briefly mentioned previously. For example the bird of prey section has been split into new world vultures, Secretary Bird, Osprey, falcons, hawks, eagles and old world vultures, which makes for a far more digestible and representative section on the diversity of raptor types. Similarly the section on game birds has been increased from 14 to 21 pages, allowing for greater detail in defining and illustrating the separate species.

Each family is given a short fact-file showing its global distribution and giving details on habitat, size, plumage, voice, nest, eggs, diet and conservation status. The text is also divided into sections describing different elements of the family ecology such as form and function, diet, distribution patterns, breeding biology and conservation and environment. The last of these sections emphasises the mostly man-made pressures on the different families and priorities for their conservation.

There are some completely new sub-sections such as the photographic representation of the Osprey fishing technique and a section on teaching cranes how to migrate, which produce some interesting asides. Many of the other sub-sections were present in the older version but have now been updated and some new ones reflect current conservation concerns such as '*The Skylark's Decline*'.

This encyclopaedia has managed to present a huge amount of information in one volume in a very readable and visually appealing manner. For only £35 it is certainly value for money as a reference book, and it has been sufficiently updated and visually improved to make it worth replacing the old version in your collection.

Garry Riddoch



***Taste of the Birds of Cuba* (video)** by Ian M. Phillips & James Dick 2003. Available from Ian M. Phillips, 88 Langdykes Drive, Cove, Aberdeen, AB12 3HW (no price given). Published privately.

This video, with a running time of 53 minutes, includes almost all of Cuba's endemic birds as well as many of the Caribbean specialities and some of the winter visitors occurring on the island. Inevitably, the image quality varies but many are very good.

It would appear to have been made primarily as an aid to identification as there are no images of the country or habitat shots which might have enhanced the film. Some good features are included in this respect such as the split-screen shots depicting some similar species, for example, mockingbirds but why not all? The Crows and Kingbirds would have benefited from this treatment too; also the species are randomly ordered with similar species sometimes far apart making direct comparisons more difficult.

Greater use of a tripod would have helped to eliminate some camera wobble that is occasionally a minor irritant; the soundtrack, too, could be improved. There are many shots of singing birds which will be an attraction for those interested in this group of species but, too often, the sound of people talking, the wind or tape playback, can also be heard. I would rather have preferred to hear a good commentary rather than read captions but if captions are to be used they should contain more information.

Nonetheless, this attractive film is a worthy effort from two short trips. I would recommend it to anyone going to this fabulous island or as a souvenir for those lucky enough to have already been.

Richard Schofield

Handbook of Birds of the World Volume 8 – Broadbills to Tapaculos edited by Del Hoyo J,Christie C & Elliott A. Published by Lynx, hbk.ISBN 84-87334-50-4. Price £110.

Weighing in at 10 lbs. with 845 pages plus a price tag of £110, this is a mind-blowing book. As it is the eighth volume of a series, it is very likely that anyone having the previous seven books, will buy this one automatically. It follows the layout of the earlier books with an introductory article which, for this book, is 24 pages on the "brief history of classifying birds". My initial reaction was "ugh!" but as I flicked through the section my eyes caught the words and I started to read; it was so well written that I went back to the beginning and read the whole thing.

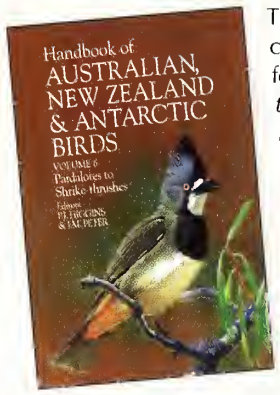
This volume covers broadbills, pittas, ovenbirds, woodcreepers, antbirds, gnateaters and the superb tapaculos; these are mainly birds of the rain forest and many will be unknown to SOC members. However, looking at this book will make you yearn to see some of these wonderful birds and, even if you don't, it is still a joy to look at and read. Each family has a general introduction of its characteristics divided into eight different headings such as habitat, voice, etc., and two fascinating sections on relationships with man and status and conservation. This section is superbly illustrated with stunning photographs, some of very secretive species.

Identification-type plate(s) follow which are just breath-taking – just look at the plates of pittas by Chris Rose and marvel at them. Again, there are a series of different paragraphs following the first section plus distribution maps. All this is backed by 38 pages of references and a first-class index.

This series has been justifiably praised around the world and they are truly wonderful books. I only have one regret – I wish I had started to collect them when they first appeared!

Frank Hamilton

Handbook of Australian, New Zealand & Antarctic Birds, Vol. 6 Pardalotes to Shrike Thrushes edited by P.J. Higgins & J.M. Peter, 2003. Oxford University Press, hbk. ISBN 0-19-553762-9, price £160 (assumed).



This volume clearly follows the format of '*Birds of the Western Palearctic*' (*BWP*) and would appear to attain the same high standards of research and presentation of that publication. All familiar with *BWP* will recognise the sequence of headings employed in species' descriptions from "Field Characteristics" to "Geographical Variations". There are additional sub-headings for "Banding" and "Threats and Human Interactions" all of which prove useful when reference is made to them. It is also helpful that "References" are located immediately at the end of a species' description. Perhaps it is unfortunate that the price is not shown in the review volume but, if you own the previous five volumes, what is the option?

John Skilling

A History of Caithness Birds by Sinclair Manson. Published and available from the author at 7 Duncan Street, Thurso, KW14 7HZ. 147 pages, price £10 including p&p.

The ornithology of the most northerly mainland county in Scotland has been somewhat neglected over the years, so the appearance of this publication is a most welcome addition to our avifauna literature. The ring-bound volume is very much expanded and an updated work based on Collett & Manson's annotated check-list of 1986. An introduction provides a short history of bird recording within the county and is followed by a six-page section describing the birds to be found in Caithness by habitat preference. The main text of some 126 pages lists all the species known to have been recorded with details of their status and distribution. A gazetteer and bibliography complete the work.

David Clugston

Birds of the West Indies by Herbert Raffaele, James Willey, Orlando Garrido, Allan Keith & Janis Raffaele, 2003. Published by Christopher Helm, pbk. ISBN 0-7136-5419-8, price £16.99.

This book is a field-friendly version of a publication of the same name and by the same authors that appeared in 1998. The earlier book was a superb publication and in a review of it I praised it mightily. Does this pocket version reach the same heights? Well, yes, it does in its way. It has a soft weather-resistant cover of the usual material. The introduction covers the scope of the book and how to use it and then goes on to a crisp and concise five pages on conservation in the West Indies. Excellent stuff!

The meat of the book follows with 188 pages of alternating plates and text. Only two of the plates have been completely re-painted (Swifts and Vireos) although obviously the layout is different to accommodate the smaller format. The text has been purposely kept to the minimum and range maps are only included where necessary. There is a selected bibliography followed by a comprehensive index.

The plates are not the finest in the world but neither are they the worst. You might look slightly askance at the jizz of some of the birds when you have them in front of you but you would be hard pressed not to identify them correctly. The text says just enough and, for the species I looked at, says it clearly; I could not find a single error in either the English or scientific names.

If I had to find something to criticise it would be that the authors have excluded the locality check-list that appeared in the larger and earlier version – a table of what occurs (and the status) in each of the 25 islands or island-groups. They have, obviously, left it out for reasons of space but it can be useful when faced with five plates of tyrant flycatchers.

This book does exactly what it says on the cover and does it well. You might want the larger version in your luggage at the hotel as back-up but, in the field, this will serve excellently. If you are going birding in the West Indies – what a good idea! – buy it.

Andy Mitchell

A Swan's Year

Jimmy Maxwell

Mute Swan CPA green was born in East Lothian in 1998 at Thurston Pond, near Innerwick, and his mate FJL green (originally BPI green) in 1997 on the River Tyne at Haddington. In 2002 they nested in Edinburgh by the Water of Leith at Coltbridge, below the Gallery of Modern Art. Two cygnets hatched from 4 eggs on 25 May, but one was lost a few nights later. During June the family moved down river, over high weirs (effectively waterfalls) at the Dean Village, to Stockbridge and the Colonies. On 30 June they were videoed during an annual duck race, surrounded by 2000 numbered yellow ducklings floating down to Falshaw Bridge. The cygnet, aged six weeks, disappeared about a week into July.

2003 was a roller coaster year for CPA, and worthy of record. He and FJL spent winter 2002–03 on the Water of Leith, from Warriston to Coltbridge and Murrayfield, periodically visiting the eastern part of the Union Canal. The pair was seen rebuilding the 2002 nest on 19–20 March, but then moved 1200m up river to an apparently crazy site, highly likely to be swept away by the first heavy rain. This was on a sandbank in the river, by the entrance to Murrayfield Icerink, a mere foot above the currently low water level. Quite a substantial nest was built, backed by a large yellow NO PARKING signboard.

The first egg was laid early on 28 March, and eventually there were six. Surprisingly the nest survived for a time, thanks to very dry weather, but I was sure it would soon be flooded. The pen continued to incubate, in front of an admiring public, and an illustrated web site www.murray-fieldswans.co.uk appeared to tell the story.

The dry weather could not last. On 1 May, after recent rain, there was still some sandbank and a sitting swan before 7am, but it continued to rain heavily and the river swelled with water from further up and also from a nearby storm drain (the former Stank), so that by 10am the pen sat just 6" above the water rising under the nest. At 10.10am she stood up, revealing her 6 eggs almost covered by water; it was striking that she sat on while the water rose around them. She tried turning the eggs, which was no help as they were almost afloat... I did not wait in the rain to see the whole lot swept away.

Yet next morning at 6.30am FJL was sitting on her nest as if nothing had happened, with CPA nearby. The water level was down and quite a bit of the sand had emerged. All looked normal as if the drama never happened; anyone who had seen the flooded nest would hardly believe it. The persistence of the pen astonished me – all six eggs were still there – but surely they must be damaged or at least chilled? That was not the end of the rain and at times the pen sat on an island nest surrounded by fast-flowing water, with little sign of the sandbank.

On 11 May two cygnets had hatched, and by 13 May there were five, with one unhatched egg. This success may have been because the pen returned quickly to sit on the wet eggs. There were still 5 cygnets by the Icerink early on 25 May. Next morning the pair was down river at Coltbridge Bowling Club, but with only 4 cygnets. The website says the fifth was found dead on the 25th, possibly killed by one of two cats in the riverbed. The family was at Coltbridge on 28 May but disappeared by 2 June. I only found it again on 11 June, a startling 2_ km up river by the gates to Saughton Park, a hard swim against the flow for the cygnets, assuming they got there unaided.

The family soon moved down river again, being seen at Saughtonhall Avenue (12 June), Coltbridge (13 June), the old ford in Dean Village (18 June), and at Stockbridge, by the Colonies (21 June), where it remained near the shingle bend in the river.

Disaster struck when a Rottweiler was seen to attack and kill the pen FJL and a cygnet. Cob CPA and the other 3 cygnets were taken to the SSPCA Wildlife Centre at Middlebank, Dunfermline, on 15 July. Danger of another attack meant they could not be returned to Stockbridge, so on 7 August they were released on a familiar stretch at the eastern end of the Union Canal. LFP white was there, having nested unsuccessfully and been left by her unringed mate. She had sat on eggs at Viewforth in face of a very intrusive territorial pair of Mute Swans, which should have been seen off by her mate, and even suffered the attentions of a Black Swan that came to sit on the base of the nest but, eventually, she failed to hatch her clutch.

CPA and LFP and the 3 cygnets joined up and it looked for all the world as if they were a pair that had bred on the canal. The 3_ month cygnets were ringed on 23 August, but by 2 September there was further turmoil. An unringed cob was now with LFP at the canal basin, and CPA was along at Harrison Park with several other visiting swans. The 3 cygnets remained with LFP and her new cob, but later were on their own, when the adults moved along the canal.

On 26 September the unringed bird and LFP again had the 3 cygnets in tow at Viewforth, an obvious family group, except that neither adult was parent of the cygnets. Another adult at the extreme E end of the canal may have been CPA, ousted by the unringed cob. By 29 September, the latter swan was gone, and next day CPA was seen back on the Water of Leith at Coltbridge. The cygnets continued with or near the adults, but on 15 October LFP was seen chasing one about the canal basin, - it fled clumsily west, refusing to pause or look back. Another was E of the Leamington Lift Bridge in a nasty algal area with the unringed bird, while the third was not to be seen; so LFP had the place to herself. One might say the cygnets were dispersed; and I did not see them together again, though one turned up at Musselburgh in November.

Jimmy Maxwell

Thereafter CPA was regularly on the Water of Leith, from Coltbridge to Murrayfield, even to Slateford, and visited the Union Canal. He was accompanied by a young bird FZN green (b. 2002 on canal at Viewforth) from 27 October to 11 December but ended the year on his own. By mid January 2004 he was back with LFP on the canal - but that will be another story. My observations are enhanced by information culled from notes by J Baker, M Betts, A W & L M Brown, E H L Macmillan, W Renwick and others, without which there would be more gaps in the story. Lots more may be seen on the website at www.murrayfieldswans.co.uk.

Andrew T Macmillan

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RECENT REPORTS

A Review of winter 2003–2004

It was on the whole a very mild winter period and after the fantastic autumn, it was hoped that perhaps one or two surprises would be lurking around. Record numbers of Yellow-browed Warblers were found this winter in England as well as several Dusky and Hume's Yellow-browed Warblers, not to mention American Robins and Baltimore Oriole. Alas in Scotland it was not to be, with perhaps the only equivalent being the **Rufous Turtle Dove** (form '*meena*') present in early Dec. near Dunnet (Caithness), which, having not been seen since 9th Dec, reappeared by St John's Loch on 23rd Feb. Three American Coots and a fantastic selection of rare wildfowl were to be the headline-grabbers in Scotland.

It is hard to think of another occasion where there were three records in one month of a previously extremely rare bird, (i.e. a bird with one or two previous British records only), but that was the case with **American Coot** this winter. With only two previous records in Britain, three were seen, and all in Scotland. The bird found on 30th Nov. at Loch of Clickimin (Shetland), remained throughout - another found at West Loch Ollay, South Uist (Outer Hebrides) on 25th Jan., stayed on into March and the third was seen at Castle Loch, Lochmaben (Dumfries and Galloway) from 11th - 17th Feb. The bird on South Uist appears now to be paired up with a normal Coot – that could be interesting!

American Coot, South Uist. (Martin Scott)

Harlequin Duck, Lewis. (Martin Scott)

The Outer Hebrides had a fantastic winter with a superb selection of Nearctic wildfowl and gulls on offer, though arguably the bird of the winter there was the female **Harlequin Duck** on Lewis. Present since at least mid – Jan. to the north of Stornoway at Col Beach, news of its presence was first reported on Birdline Scotland on 17th Feb. It remained there until the 21st and was then relocated on 5th Mar. just north of there at Griais. Casual birdwatcher and full-time fireman, Martin Hague had found it in Jan. and had managed to identify it from a bird book. Leaving it at that, he later mentioned it in mid-Feb to a carload from Lancashire who were sharing the same guesthouse on Benbecula - news was released and the second record for the Outer Hebrides was confirmed.

The 1st-winter female **Redhead** on Barra remained throughout at Loch Tangasdail. This bird had, quite rightly, caused quite a few identification headaches throughout the autumn and early winter, but perseverance by some of the original observers back in Sept/Oct paid off. They pursued what they considered to be its correct identification by emailing photos to various experts - Keith Vinnicombe and Martin Garner amongst others confirmed the id from this evidence. Its remote location, and also the controversy over the id, meant that this third for Britain, and first ever female in the Western Palearctic, was not well watched at all – perhaps only less than thirty people had seen it by the end of Feb.

The variety of Nearctic wildfowl on the Outer Hebrides continued with a drake **American Wigeon** present throughout on South Uist, only four others being reported elsewhere in Scotland. Four **Surf Scoters** (three drakes and a female) were present throughout at Sound of Taransay, Harris with five others seen elsewhere - a drake **Ring-necked Duck** was on Loch an Tiumpan, Lewis from 18th-24th Jan. and two drakes were seen elsewhere, on Shetland in Jan and in D & G in Feb. A white morph **Snow Goose** was on Baleshare for the period with at least five elsewhere this winter, including a blue morph on Islay (Argyll)

Redhead, Barra. (Martin Scott)

where the adult **Red-breasted Goose** also remained amongst the Barnacle Geese. At least six presumed vagrant **Canada Geese** were also seen on the island this winter with a Richardson's Canada Goose, form '*hutchinsii*', on Berneray (Outer Hebrides) until at least 14th Feb. and two popular birds were at WWT Caerlaverock (D&G) throughout with Taverner's Canada Goose last reported there on 16th Feb.

It has been a great winter period for **Green-winged Teal** with up to 20 drakes reported, including at least four different ones on the Outer Hebrides and three seen at the Vane Farm RSPB reserve (Kinross) on 17th Jan. Away from the Central Scotland flock, there were several reports of **Taiga Bean Geese** from Shetland, Orkney, Caithness and Islay including 13 at Huesbreck (Shetland) on 18th Feb., whilst two **Tundra Bean Geese** were on Fair Isle in the first week of Jan. It has not been a great winter for **Smew** with only 25+ reported, though **King Eider** has seen a return to form with up to four different on Shetland during the period, a female again off Leven (Fife) from 13th Dec. and a drake in Loch Ryan (D & G) from 29th Dec. Also in the last county, a drake **Lesser Scaup** was at Lochmaben from 27th Dec - 28th Jan, then at WWT Caerlaverock on 16th-17th Feb, at Lochmaben on 19th and then two drakes were at Milton Loch on 28th-29th.

Snow Goose, North-East Scotland. (Tim Marshall)

Ring-billed Gull, Highland. (Alastair McNee)

At least two 1st-winter **American Herring Gulls** were seen on the Outer Hebrides: on Lewis from 15th-19th Dec. and at least one on Benbecula from 20th-29th Feb. (there are currently only two accepted Scottish records). Also in Feb., three more mature birds were seen on Lewis - an adult, a 4th-winter and a 3rd-winter. White-winged gulls throughout Dec. and Jan. were only reported in low numbers though the best were to be found on the Outer Hebrides with in Jan. up to ten different **Iceland Gulls** and five **Glaucous Gulls** seen on Lewis. There was a distinct influx of Iceland Gulls at the end of Feb. with a high proportion of **Kumlien's Gulls** reported amongst them. At least eight were seen, mostly from the 26th Feb onwards, including four different at Stornoway harbour, Lewis, on the 26th. 50+ Iceland Gulls were reported in Feb including six at Stornoway Harbour (Outer Hebrides) on 26th and six birds roosting at Strathclyde Loch

Kumlien's Gull, Lewis. (Martin Scott)

(Lanarkshire) on 25th. Glaucous Gull was again outnumbered with e.g. in Feb., 30+ reported. The 'enigma' that is **Yellow-legged Gull** in Scotland continued with five adults reported in the 'wrong' season! (i.e. winter). There was a good showing by **Ring-billed Gull** with six seen - the adult back for its 16th consecutive winter at Stromness (Orkney), an adult at Dingwall (Highland) from 25th Jan, a 1st-winter at Daliburgh, South Uist (Outer Hebrides) from 19th Jan., and in Feb an adult on Islay on the 21st and 1st-winters in Caithness on 19th and on Shetland from 19th.

Lesser Scaup, Ayrshire. (Brian Orr)

There were generally only low counts of **Little Auks**, though at the end of Dec., large numbers were seen in the outer Firth of Forth with 383+ in one hour past Tyninghame on 27th, 219 in just 30 minutes the same day past Dunbar and 250 in half an hour past Barns Ness on 28th (all Lothian) - 50 in Yell Sound on 2nd Dec. was the largest reported count elsewhere. Also on Shetland, a **White-billed Diver** was seen again off Kirkabister on 9th-12th Feb. with another at Gruinard Bay (Highland) on 20th Feb. The long staying male **Snowy Owl** on the Outer Hebrides was seen

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Little Bunting, North-East Scotland, seen on 24 January 2004 at an inland winter finch ringing site. (Harry Scott)

again on North Uist in Dec., then on Kirkibost Island off North Uist on at least 9th-16th Feb.

The mildness of the winter was perhaps reflected in the two over-wintering **Little Egrets** on Shetland and South Uist and the **Common Crane** reported flying over near Stepps (North Lanarkshire) on 6th Jan. A **Spoonbill** survived on Shetland until 24th Dec. at least, and an **Avocet** was also seen there in Dec. - initially on Whalsay on 17th and then in South Nesting from 24th-2nd January at least. Also in Dec., a very late juv **American Golden Plover** was seen at Skinflats (Upper Forth) on 28th and a **Spotted Crake** was reported at the Endrick Mouth, Loch Lomond on 7th. Five **Bitterns** were reported from Highland, Clyde, D&G (2) and at RSPB Loch of Strathbeg (Aberdeenshire), the latter there until 16th Feb at least.

In Dec., 500+ **Waxwings** were still around, though numbers and reports tailed off dramatically by the end of the month. The largest numbers were around Edinburgh though there was a report of 100+ in Crossford (Lanarkshire) on 18th. Around 150 were reported in Jan. and then only 70 in Feb. It has been another very good winter for **Great Grey Shrike** with 12 reported, whilst a **Shore Lark** was at Tyninghame (Lothian) from 18th Jan. An **Arctic Redpoll** of the form '*hornemanni*' was reported at Loch Eriboll (Highland) on 31st Dec. with a 1st-winter **Rose-coloured Starling** nearby at Bettyhill on 26th. **Lapland Buntings** were seen in Fife, Aberdeenshire and Outer Hebrides whilst a **Water Pipit** was at Maidens (Ayrshire) until 17th Jan. with others on the Eden Estuary (Fife) on 22nd Jan. and at Meikle Loch (Aberdeenshire) from 26th-28th Feb. **Hawfinches** showed well throughout Jan. and Feb. at Scone Palace (Perthshire) with at least 26 birds present. Three **Firecrests** were seen in the period - a popular one at Mersehead RSPB (Dumfries and Galloway) from 18th Jan. with another in the same county at Newton Stewart on 19th Feb. and one at Morar (Highland) on 6th Jan.

Angus Murray (BirdLine Scotland)

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Scottish Bird News

Scottish Bird News is the magazine of the SOC. It acts as a channel of communication for SOC members and disseminates information relevant to Scotland's birdlife. It is published four times a year at the beginning of March, June, September and December. Articles and notices are welcomed and should be sent to the Editor at the address below no later than five weeks before publication. The views expressed are not necessarily the policy of the SOC. Contributors should note that material has to be edited, often at short notice, and it is not practical to let authors see these changes in advance of publication.

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The Scottish Ornithologists' Club (SOC) was established by a group of Scottish ornithologists who met together in the rooms of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society in Edinburgh on 24th March 1936.

The Club now has 2200 members and 14 branches around Scotland. It plays a central role in Scottish birdwatching, bringing together amateur birdwatchers, keen birders and research ornithologists with the aims of documenting, studying and, not least, enjoying Scotland's varied birdlife. Above all, the SOC is a club, relying heavily on keen volunteers and the support of its membership.

Headquarters provide central publications and an annual conference, and houses the Waterston Library, the most comprehensive library of bird literature in Scotland. The network of branches, which meet in Aberdeen, Ayr, the Borders, Dumfries, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Inverness, New Galloway, Orkney, St Andrews, Stirling, Stranraer and Thurso, organise field meetings, a winter programme of talks and social events.

The SOC also supports the Local Recorders' Network and the Scottish Birds Records Committee. The latter maintains the 'official' Scottish List on behalf of the Club. The Club supports research and survey work through its Research Grants.

The Club maintains a regularly-updated web site, which not only contains much information about the Club, but is also the key source of information about birds and birdwatching in Scotland.

www.the-soc.org.uk

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